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Dutch voters choose Europe

Where once European integration was scarcely controversial in Dutch politics, reservations have dominated for quite some time – also in 2019. In January this year, Prime Minister Mark Rutte admitted that he considered the European elections to be ‘not so relevant’, and that national elections were more important. Shortly before the European elections, the House of Representatives of the Dutch Parliament passed a motion with a two-thirds majority in which the removal of the phrase ‘[creating] an ever closer union’ from European agreements was proposed, as this phrase could contribute to ‘an unnecessary and undesirable restriction of the sovereignty of member states’. Against this background, the campaigns for the European elections in the Netherlands took place. In the provincial elections that were held two months earlier, the populist and Eurosceptic and up till then quite marginal party Forum voor Democratie (FvD) was surprisingly voted as the biggest party, closely followed by the conservative-liberal VVD party led by Prime Minister Rutte. As a result, and on the basis of opinion polls, everyone assumed that the European elections would also turn out to be a duel between these parties.

Eighteen parties participated in the European elections; two less than in 2014. This number included all thirteen parties represented in the House of Representatives. Although two Dutch politicians were *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates of a European political party) – Frans Timmermans (PvdA) of the Party of European Socialists and Bas Eickhout (GroenLinks) of the European Greens – the European elections were not of much interest to most voters. This was partly due to the unfamiliarity of the lead candidates. Opinion polls show that the voters scarcely knew most of the candidates – which is also due to the fact that Dutch parties rarely appoint prominent politicians as European candidates. An exception was Timmermans (PvdA), Vice Chair of the European Commission since 2014 and former Minister of Foreign Affairs. The PvdA candidate was the only one known by a (large) majority of the voters. A quarter of voters knew D66 candidate Sophie in’t Veld; the other candidates were known by no more than 10 per cent of the voters.

Insofar as the election campaigns were conducted, they revolved around topics like migration, the climate and the possibility of a ‘Nexit’. Only when the SP personally attacked Timmermans in an advertisement did the campaigns cause a stir. The SP painted him as a greedy Brussels bureaucrat who wanted to make Europe a super-state in which the Netherlands would disappear. This type of ‘negative campaigning’, quite unusual in the Dutch political culture, seems to have done more harm to the SP than to Timmermans. The latter, who made a strong impression in the campaign with all of his experience, did not hit back.

Remarkably absent in the campaign was Geert Wilders of the right-wing populist and Eurosceptic PVV, who had been completely drowned out in the media by his competitor,

FvD-leader Thierry Baudet. The latter entered the news in a controversial manner by spreading a far-right video in which asylum seekers were associated with rape and murder, and by calling into question the right to abortion and euthanasia. Baudet was challenged in a live debate by Prime Minister Rutte, who feared that his VVD party would be defeated by the FvD once again, just as it had in the provincial elections. While Rutte thus offered a platform to his populist rival, he hoped to foster a duel through which to win the elections. The debate was shown live on television on the evening before the elections. Prior to this broadcast, twelve European candidates of the most relevant parties held their own – fragmented – debate, which in fact proved to be no more than a pre-programme to the showdown between two national (and for the European Parliament, unelectable) party leaders.

The results of the European elections delivered big surprises. Neither the VVD nor the FvD came out as the biggest party, despite their fuelled duel, but instead the party depreciated by many: the PvdA, with six seats (double the amount that they achieved in 2014). Research shows that many voters chose this party because of Timmermans. An even more notable result was that the anticipated populist attack on the pro-European block did not materialize. The Eurosceptic anti-establishment right- and left-wing parties PVV and SP disappeared from the European Parliament (losing their four and two seats respectively), while newcomer FvD lagged behind the high expectations by achieving just three seats. The pro-European parties won 20 out of 26 seats, three more than in 2014. Their proportion thus rose from two-thirds to around three-quarters of the seats allocated to the Netherlands in the European Parliament – the Dutch voters chose Europe. They also let their opinions be heard more than in 2014: turnout was almost five per cent point higher, and with a total turnout percentage of 41.8 per cent, it rose above 40 per cent for the first time since 1989.